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Greater Expectations

Leviticus 22:1-33

Intro: The main theme of this section (21-24) is on showing due reverence to the Lord's holy things and holy times. 21-22 focus specifically on the responsibilities of the priests; teaching that priests in Israel were held to a higher standard of holiness than other Israelites. The reasons for this are 2-fold: 1) the Lord calls His priests to a special role as those who constantly serve before His presence. 2) Priests are to be models of both ritual and moral purity. The focus of ch21 concerned how the priests and the high priest conducted themselves in the midst of family grief and who they married. It also provided a list of 12 disabilities that would prevent a descendant of Aaron from serving in the tabernacle. We are to understand that while the list was specific, it wasn't exhaustive. It merely represented that a priest must be **physically whole** in order to minister before the Lord. But, while the disabled were disqualified from ministering, they were still able partake of the portion of the Lord's "food" that belonged to all priests (21:22).

Now, having just mentioned the priests' right to eat from the sacred offerings of the Israelite worshippers, ch22 goes on to command the priests to not mishandle those sacred offerings. In order for a priest's service to the Lord to be acceptable by the Lord, it wasn't enough for him to simply qualify as a son of Aaron without any physical defects. He also had to carry out his ministry in such a way that the Lord was pleased with him. The regular Israelite worshiper may observe the performance of outward ritual but God saw the inner heart, judging attitudes and motivations. In ministry, there's always more involved than just going through the motions effectively. What matters most is the condition of the heart. While there was an expectation of holiness for all of Israel, priests had a greater expectation!

1-2 – The priests of Israel often dealt with things that had previously been declared to be holy: the altar, table of showbread, golden lampstand, altar of incense as well as the sacred offerings presented to the Lord. At first glance it appears that the command to separate themselves from the holy things would also include not handling or consuming those sacred offerings. This, of course, is impossible since handling these offerings and then consuming

portions of them was the very duty of the priests. So what actually is being commanded here?

The answer is found in the definition of separate. The whole phrase is difficult to translate from Hebrew. Some versions translate it as 'to treat with respect' or 'be careful with.' Others associate the root with the word for Nazirite, which points to a meaning along the lines of 'to put away for separate use' or 'treat as distinct.' All these lead us to understand that this declaration is a striking reminder to the priests that they must not touch any of the Lord's holy things or eat of the sacred offerings unless they are ceremonially clean. None of the holy things belonged to the priests; they all belonged to the Lord. So there's a sense of separation from the holy things that even the priests had to observe. Any failure in this regard would profane the Lord's holy name, the offering and even the offeror.

The phrase separate themselves from the holy things establishes the theme for the whole chapter. It's difficult for our modern minds to comprehend the vast amounts of sacrifices that Israelite priests had to perform on a daily basis. They offered sacrifices all day long, all year long. And, while I'm sure they did it in manageable shifts, we can also see how this regular ritual could become very tedious and mundane. You think it's boring having to read through all these stipulations and regulations; imagine having to observe the tedium hour by hour, day after day! It'd be too easy for these priests to develop an attitude of professionalism that would turn a sacred ritual into a shallow routine.

One writer put it this way; he said, "Nothing is so deadening to the divine as a habitual dealing with the outsides of holy things." This unfortunate reality breeds what has been called the 'specter of professionalism,' that's the ability to go through the motions of ministry without having your heart in it. Outwardly, you do all the right things the right way, but when God looks at your heart, nothing there is right. We've all heard sermons where it sounds like the preacher was just phoning it in (He wrote it on the way to church). This attitude isn't limited to pastors, any servant of the Lord can be guilty of dropping it into Neutral and coasting through their ministry. I'm not talking about just being tired once in a while but the attitude that says, "Well, I have to be here so let's just get this over with as soon as possible."

In Israel, by the time of Malachi the prophet, the specter of professionalism

characterized the ministry of all the priests (Mal 1:6-2:6). Here in our text, carelessness and professionalism at the altar would present itself in 3 ways: unclean priests (3-9), unqualified guests (10-16) and unacceptable sacrifices (17-33). If the priest failed to follow the Lord's commands for service deliberately and meticulously, he could end up defiling himself, the sacrifices and the very altar where he was supposed to serve the Lord.

3-9 – If the statement of v2 was still unclear, the declaration of v3 makes the Lord's intentions crystal clear. If the priest performed any aspect of his duties in the tabernacle while in an impure state, he would be "cut off from My presence." At the very least, this means he would no longer be able to serve in the tabernacle in any capacity. At most, it means he could forfeit his place in the covenant community (exile) or even forfeit his life (9). So, not only did the priest's service need to be performed when he was ritually pure but also, the priest's portion of what was dedicated to the Lord in sacrifice could only be eaten by those who were ritually pure. This didn't just apply to the priest himself but to his family as well. Anyone who ate of this sacred food were required to be ritually pure.

A representative list of ritual impurities is given in 4-8. Again, the list isn't exhaustive. Any ritual uncleanness would not only prohibit the priest from ministering before the Lord but also prohibit him from partaking of the sacred food offerings. For the most part, these impure states are temporary: lasting no more than a day, and they're considered to be washed away by bathing. For skin diseases and emissions of bodily fluids, the purification times could be longer. Of course, there were certain animals that priests were never to eat. No specific rationale is provided in the text but the context of this passage tells us over and over that priests were held to a higher standard of holiness.

V9 reiterates the truth that it was actually dangerous to stand in the holy place! The x-ray technician is at far greater risk than the patient. This higher standard of holiness meant that priests were held to a more severe accountability than other Israelites. This more severe punishment for the willful ritual impurity of priests was appropriate considering their greater knowledge of the things of God and their greater responsibility. They had seen what happened to Nadab and Abihu. They saw the placard on the tabernacle wall the next day: Days without a safety incident: 0. They knew what was given to them and what was required and expected of them by the Lord.

What if a priest knowingly became defiled and did nothing to address it? How would anybody know he's unclean? He could minister at the altar, handle the sacrifices and even eat his lawful share of the sacred offerings and apparently get away with it. But the Lord would know it and the priest would be in danger of death. This type of behavior would indicate that the priest was putting himself ahead of the Lord and was more concerned about his reputation than his character. This is nothing less than utter hypocrisy. It worried him that the people might discovering his impurity but it didn't worry him that he was defiling the sacred ministry for which the Lord had set him apart. Just like the Pharisees in Jesus' day, this priest projected the appearance of purity but inside he was corrupt, even toxic, both in his service to the Lord and for the people.

All who serve the Lord and the Lord's people must be open and honest before the Lord and they must minister first and foremost, to please the Lord alone. Ministry is never to become a performance to please man, it must always be a service to the Lord. Ministers and servants should be thankful to the Lord for the privilege of being called to serve and we must treat the things of the Lord, and the people of the Lord, with holy respect. The greatest protection against professionalism and hypocrisy in ministry is cultivating a healthy fear of the Lord that is then revealed in having a tender conscience (**II Cor 1:12**). The conscience is like a window that lets in the light. When the window becomes dirty, the light gradually becomes darkness. Among all those who make up the body of Christ, ministers must especially guard their hearts and minds so that they might continue to serve the Lord in an acceptable manner.

10-16 – Not only did priests have to handle sacred offerings properly themselves, they also had to guard them from being mishandled by other Israelites. These sacred offerings had been given by the Lord to the priests and their families. The presence of the Lord's sacred food in the home of the priest rendered the priest's table as an extension of the Lord's holy table. His house became a holy place! And just as the priest ministered in a dangerous place, so too, those member of his family allowed to eat of the sacred food offerings, who by extension lived in a holy place – also *lived* in a dangerous place!

A list is provided for those who were prohibited from eating of the sacred

food. No outsider, whether a foreigner or just a member of a different tribe; no visitor; no hire handy man or house maid and no married daughters – if she married outside the tribe of Levi. A slave could eat of the sacred food because a slave was considered a full member of the family. Now, if his daughter became a widow or was divorced from her scoundrel outsider husband, she could return to her father's house and she could then eat of the sacred food again. She would retain the legal status she had before marriage, living under her father's roof, being dependent on her father's livelihood. This change of status for the returning daughter shows that the holiness of the priest extended throughout his household.

We should note that this command against giving the priest's portion to a visitor in the priest's home went squarely against the strong custom of hospitality in the culture, which normally insisted on giving guests the very best the home had to offer. Despite the accepted, even expected norm, the priest couldn't afford to be too generous with the Lord's food offerings. If he were to include a visiting outsider in a sacred meal, he would not only sin against the Lord he'd also sin against his guest. The unqualified guest would then need to bring a trespass offering to the Lord, plus a 20% fine and this would make that a very expensive meal indeed!

The faithful priest has to have the honesty and courage to say no both to himself (1-9) and to others (10-16). If the family was going to have a feast, who wouldn't want to include their own daughter in it? Just because she married a bum from another tribe doesn't mean they can't come over and join in the festivities. Oh, but it does! His loving heart might want to include them in the feast but he wasn't allowed to do so. To include them would only end up hurting them and require them to pay a steep fine.

One of the hardest things to do in Christian ministry is having to say "No" but in order to keep our fellowship pure before the Lord, we sometimes have to do it. You can't always participate in every wedding you're asked to do, namely marrying a believer and an unbeliever. Parents can't allow their children to cultivate damaging friendships, no matter how much they might want to. A congregation that refuses to participate in every new religious fad that comes down the pike is often accused of being stodgy or legalistic but just because something is popular doesn't mean it's godly. Sometimes, you need to have the courage to say "No."

17-30 – The last half of the passage has more to do with quality control in regards to sacrificial animals and the kinds of blemishes that would disqualify them from being accepted. Acceptance, the theme of this section, refers to the Lord responding with favor and pleasure to an offering and therefore, to the offeror. This acceptance required a proper sacrificial animal (**17-25**) and proper sacrificial procedure (**26-30**). Since these requirements were the responsibility of both the priest and the common Israelite worshiper, this passage is addressed to both.

17-25: Just as the priest had to be free from physical defects, so the sacrifices that they offered had to be perfect or the Lord wouldn't accept them. The Lord desired the offering to come from a heart of gratitude, of their own free will, but He would not accept the cast-offs of the herds and flocks as valid sacrifices. The value of the sacrifice should reflect the value of the one to whom it is given. The Lord had the right to receive the best that Israel had to offer. To bring a defective gift to a superior wouldn't just be ridiculous, it'd be insulting! In fact, that was the Lord's challenge to Israel in Malachi's prophecy. He said, "You're bringing all your broken-down, beaten-up and busted-out animals to Me as offerings and you expected Me to accept them? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?"

The animals that were brought to be offered to the Lord for sacrifice were to be perfect and it was the priest's job to see that this was the case in every instance. Again, there was no room for laxity or a lowering of the standard for any special cases. It didn't matter what the situation was, any priest that had an ounce of respect for his ministry and a high regard for the Lord's sacrifices would only accept those animals that perfectly met the Lord's requirements. This stubborn adherence to the Lord's commands not only respected the Lord's holiness but also protected the worshiper. To send a worshiper away with a false assurance of forgiveness would do great damage to their spiritual life.

26-30: Along with all the previous regulations in regards to the various sacrifices provided at the beginning of the book, a few more are added here. The special requirement about the age of the offering shows the tender heart of the Creator towards His creation. A calf or lamb less than a week old that was carried any distance to the tabernacle might not survive the trip. To sacrifice a newborn and it's mother on the same day was to imitate a

Canaanite fertility ritual, which was forbidden in Israel. The freewill offering of thanksgiving to the Lord was to be shared in the sanctuary precincts but the meat was to be eaten on the same day and none was to be left over after that.

31-33 – Why should a priest honor and respect the sacrifices of the Lord and the ministry He has given to him? These last verses provide the answer. All of God’s servants are to obey Him and honor His name because who He is (the Lord); because of what He is (holy); because of what He’s doing (sanctifies) and because of what He’s done (redeemed them from slavery). Israel’s obedience to the Lord was proper because of who He is and all that He had done for them. These same reasons remain true for every believer today.

God’s commands must be obeyed because He never commands anything that isn’t the best for us. Obedience to the Lord’s commands is the way we glorify His great name and magnify Him before the world. The Lord who commands us is also the One who redeemed us from the slavery of sin and He’s also the One who has set us apart and called us to be His special people. We owe everything to Him!

As we have seen, time and time again, the main theme of Leviticus is holiness, not just for the priests but for all the Israelites who, by their sacrifices, their rituals and their obedience to the Lord commandments, could become holy. While this is presented as a real possibility in Leviticus, it’s amazing to see that the NT regards this goal as having been accomplished. When Paul addresses his many epistles to saints, he’s referring to believers as holy ones and those who have been sanctified as being made holy. In doing so, Paul is declaring that the goal of Leviticus has been met. If the goal of Leviticus is that people might be made holy, then the NT declares that believers have been made holy by the death of Christ, the one who has become to us our holiness and redemption (**I Cor 1:30**).

This holiness we’ve received has both an “already” and a “not yet” part to it. When we accept Jesus Christ as our savior, His blood washes away our sin and positionally, we stand before God forgiven and holy. We have received a new nature, we are new creatures in Christ but, we still exist in the old body that is contaminated by our old nature. So, while we are positionally holy before God, we are also progressively being made holy through the

power and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This means that since we're positionally holy before God, then we're to strive for personal holiness as we walk this earth.

This striving for holiness, while it is necessary for all believers and is, in fact, the greatest evidence of their salvation, must especially characterize the lives of those who are leaders in the church. The NT is clear that leaders in the church are to be held, and are to hold themselves, to a higher standard. Sadly, the widespread reality is that the exact opposite attitude often characterizes church leaders. Now, I realize that there are a lot of churches out there that are not part of the Body of Christ, just as there are ministers out there that aren't even born-again Christians. But, among those that claim to carry the name of Christ, it seems to be one of the occupational hazards of ministry to think that God's word applies to everyone else but them. This has never been truer than it is today. I receive a newsletter via email that deals with different aspects of ministry in America but there's almost always a report on how this minister was fired for some act of malfeasance or abuse of position or whatever. And these things don't just happen in the wacky wing of the church but in churches not unlike our very own.

The lesson is unmistakable. It doesn't matter what your position is or how long your tenure has been in the body of Christ, if you are not taking deliberate steps towards holiness then you're not honoring the Lord who redeemed you, you're not submitting to the Holy Spirit who sanctifies you and you're not placing yourself in the place of favor or blessing or even protection that is provided by the Father that loves you. In short, you are entertaining spiritual disaster. And yes, forgiveness is always available to those who repent and turn to the Lord but how much time are you willing to waste chasing after the things of this world, things that are temporary, when you could be pursuing and obtaining things that are eternal? 😊